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# 'Take Up Your Cross'

## Public Theology between Populism and Pluralism in the Post-Migrant Context

**Abstract:** As of 1 June 2018, the symbol of the cross has to be shown in all state offices of Bavaria in Germany. The government decree has stirred up controversy. In order to chart the churches' response to this cross controversy, I return to a conversation between Robert N. Bellah and Martin E. Marty that was crucial to the study of religion in the 1960s and the 1970s. Drawing on the core concepts of this conversation in which Marty coined the combination of 'public' with 'theology', I analyze and assess the cross controversy as a case of what I call the populist predicament. I argue that the programme of public theology that Marty proposed provides a path out of the populist predicament because it combines celebration and critique of the identity of a country. Ultimately, I advance Marty's programme by advocating for a pluralist position of public theology in the post-migrant context.

As of 1 June 2018, the symbol of the cross has to be shown in all offices of the state of Bavaria in the Federal Republic of Germany.<sup>1</sup> According to Head of State, Markus Söder, the cross symbolizes 'Bavarian identity': by decree, it is to be displayed in the entrances of all offices 'as a visible confession to the fundamental values of the legal and social order of Bavaria'.<sup>2</sup> Söder certainly made such a confession when he hung up a cross in the entrance of his office soon after the decision had been made. After the snapshot was shared widely in online and offline media,<sup>3</sup> the decree was confronted with critique from both the political left and the political right. How can a cross stir up so much controversy?

The cross controversy is paradigmatic of post-migrant contexts.<sup>4</sup> These contexts are characterized by the conflictual negotiations and the continuous re-negotiations of identity that occur once on-going migration has been acknowledged or accepted as a characteristic of a

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<sup>1</sup> If not stated otherwise, all translations from primary and secondary literature in German are my own.

<sup>2</sup> See the minutes of the meeting in which the cabinet decided on the decree, 'Bericht aus der Kabinettsitzung vom 24. April 2018', available at <http://bayern.de/bericht-aus-der-kabinettsitzung-vom-24-april-2018>, para. 1-2 [last accessed 12 May 2018].

<sup>3</sup> Markus Söder posted the snapshot on twitter. It is available at [https://twitter.com/Markus\\_Soeder/status/988768341820170240](https://twitter.com/Markus_Soeder/status/988768341820170240) [last accessed 12 May 2018].

<sup>4</sup> Throughout, I refer to Naika Foroutan's conceptualization of post-migrant societies. She stresses that the prefix 'post' does not point to the end of migration. Instead, it indicates that migration is acknowledged or accepted as a central characteristic of the societies in question so that conversations about its causes, configurations, and consequences for the identity of the country are required. In these conversations, both the defenders and the despisers of migration have a say. For empirical explorations of the post-migrant society of Germany, see the trilogy by Naika Foroutan, Coskun Canan, Sina Arnold, Benjamin Schwarze, Steffen Beigang, and Dorina Kalkum, *Deutschland postmigrantisch I: Gesellschaft, Religion, Identität* (Berlin: Berliner Institut für empirische Migrations- und Integrationsforschung, 2014); Naika Foroutan, Coskun Canan, Benjamin Schwarze, Steffen Beigang, and Dorina Kalkum, *Deutschland postmigrantisch II: Einstellungen von Jugendlichen und jungen Erwachsenen zu Gesellschaft, Religion und Identität* (Berlin: Berliner Institut für empirische Migrations- und Integrationsforschung, 2015); and Coskun Canan and Naika Foroutan, *Deutschland postmigrantisch III: Migrantische Perspektiven auf deutsche Identitäten. Einstellungen von Personen mit und ohne Migrationshintergrund zu nationaler Identität in Deutschland* (Berlin: Berliner Institut für empirische Migrations- und Integrationsforschung, 2016).

country. Considering the currency and the centrality of post-migration contexts across contemporary Europe,<sup>5</sup> it is crucial to study how churches comport themselves under these conditions. Based in Bavaria, the representatives of the two German mainline churches, Archbishop Reinhard Marx, representing Catholicism in Germany, and Bishop Heinrich Bedford-Strohm, representing Protestantism in Germany, were among the most cautious and the most careful critics of the decree to display crosses. In what follows, I will take their criticisms as concrete cases in order to chart the contours of a public theology for the post-migrant context.

Methodologically, I will return to a conversation between Robert N. Bellah and Martin E. Marty that held the study of religion in suspense during the 1960s and the 1970s. The conversation in which Marty coined the curious combination of ‘public’ with ‘theology’ (and of ‘theology’ with ‘public’) centred on the categories of ‘civil religion’ and ‘confessional religion’.<sup>6</sup> Today, these categories are particularly pertinent because, analytically, they undermine the strict separation of religion from culture and of culture from religion that is persistently presumed in the public square. Applying the categories of civil and confessional religion to the cross controversy, I will analyze and assess the decree as a case of what I call the ‘populist predicament’. By ‘populist predicament’, I mean the problematic position churches are put in when populists lay claim to Christianity because it confronts theologians with the plight both to criticize and to confirm the significance of Christianity for the identity of the country. Can they square the circle? I will argue that the programme of public theology that Marty proposed in his conversation with Bellah provides a promising path out of the populist predicament because it allows churches to both criticize and confirm the significance of Christianity for the identity of the country. Advancing Marty’s programme, I will advocate for a pluralist position of public theology in the post-migrant context. Only if it presents the significance of both Christian and non-Christian religions for the construction of the identity of a country, has public theology the potential to provoke and preserve the negotiations and the re-negotiations of identity that post-migrant contexts require.

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<sup>5</sup> See the contributions concentrating on the ‘constellations’ and on the ‘conflicts’ of the current so-called refugee crisis in Ulrich Schmiedel and Graeme Smith, eds, *Religion in the European Refugee Crisis* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 15-120; 123-224.

<sup>6</sup> Martin E. Marty, ‘Two Kinds of Two Kinds of Civil Religion’, in Russell E. Richey and Donald G. Jones, eds., *American Civil Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), pp. 139-157. References to the study in which Marty coined this curious combination run through almost all accounts of public theology. See especially the concise but comprehensive exploration by E. Harold Breitenberg, Jr., ‘To Tell the Truth: Will the Real Public Theology Please Stand Up?’, *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 23:2 (2003), pp. 55-96. However, given that Marty’s programme of public theology is normally neither analyzed nor assessed in these accounts, his study is arguably more often referenced than read.

# 1 Interpreting the Cross Controversy with Robert Bellah

Robert N. Bellah's seminal study, 'Civil Religion in America', published in *Daedalus* in 1967, had a significant impact on the theological and the non-theological study of religion.<sup>7</sup> Bellah popularized the concept of 'civil religion' in contrast to 'confessional religion'. Discussing Bellah's central category, I will analyze the decree to display crosses in the state offices of Bavaria as a case of 'uncivil' rather than 'civil' religion.<sup>8</sup> In the post-migrant context, I will argue, the cross is claimed for the construction of identity in order to distinguish the insider from the outsider who is identified here with Islam. The decree displays the claim to Christianity so characteristic of contemporary populist politics.

What is civil religion? Bellah borrows the concept from Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *The Social Contract*.<sup>9</sup> He suggests that there are two types of religion: the type of 'confessional religion' that is tied to specific ecclesial institutions and the type of 'civil religion' that is not tied to specific ecclesial institutions. Both require 'the same care in understanding'.<sup>10</sup> President John F. Kennedy's inauguration is Bellah's empirical example for the civil in contrast to the confessional role of religion. Bellah is struck by the repeated reference to God. Since 'God' is a concept that 'almost all Americans can accept', Bellah suggests, it connects Christians and non-Christians.<sup>11</sup> Kennedy knew how significant coherence is in a 'nation of immigrants'.<sup>12</sup> But despite his repeated reference to God, Bellah stresses, he acknowledged the separation of the churches from the state and of the state from the churches. 'Considering the separation', Bellah asks, 'how is a president justified in using the word "God" at all?'<sup>13</sup> The answer is that the justification of the president comes with a civil-religious rather than a confessional-religious

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<sup>7</sup> Robert N. Bellah, 'Civil Religion in America', *Daedalus* 96:1 (1967), pp. 1-21. Bellah's study was reprinted in Richey and Jones, eds, *American Civil Religion*. In their introduction, the editors suggest scholarly and social reasons for the success of Bellah's category. See Russel E. Richey and Donald G. Jones, 'The Civil Religion Debate', in Richey and Jones, eds, *American Civil Religion*, pp. 3-20. Bellah developed and discussed his category especially in Robert N. Bellah, *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1975); Robert N. Bellah and Philip E. Hammond, *Varieties of Civil Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980), and also Robert N. Bellah, *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditionalist World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

<sup>8</sup> As will become clear below, I distinguish 'civil' and 'uncivil' religion according to the concept of cohesion that is implied or intended by them. Bellah interprets these concepts differently. See Robert E. Bellah and Frederick E. Greenspahn, eds, *Uncivil Religion: Interreligious Hostility in America* (New York: Crossroads, 1987).

<sup>9</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, trans. Christopher Betts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 158-167.

<sup>10</sup> Bellah, 'Civil Religion in America', p. 1.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>12</sup> See John F. Kennedy's posthumously published *A Nation of Immigrants. Introduction by Edward M. Kennedy. Foreword by Abraham A. Foxman* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2017).

<sup>13</sup> Bellah, 'Civil Religion in America', p. 3.

understanding of the word.<sup>14</sup> If Bellah's categories destabilize the well-worn demarcation of religion from culture and culture from religion, then, what is the difference? Although Kennedy was a Christian, Bellah maintains, the God of his address could be accepted by Christians and non-Christians alike. Accordingly, Kennedy claimed public civil religion rather than private confessional religion at his inauguration. Bellah admits that the civil-religious (in contrast to the confessional-religious) concept of God 'means so many different things to so many different people that it is almost an empty sign', but argues that the emptiness of the sign is significant.<sup>15</sup> Because of the multiple meanings of the symbol of God, the symbol can represent almost all Americans.

Although acceptable to almost all Americans, the concept of God claimed by politicians like Kennedy is characterized by a certain theological and certain anthropological content. Drawing on documents from the history of the United States, Bellah describes and defines the civil-religious in contrast to the confessional-religious concept of God: 'Even though he is somewhat deist in cast', Bellah (for whom God is apparently a 'he' rather than a 'she') writes, 'he is by no means simply a watchmaker'.<sup>16</sup> Instead, God is interested and intervenes in the fate of the 'American Israel'.<sup>17</sup> There is a relation between religion and nation that is reflected in Kennedy's address: 'The whole address can be understood as only the most recent statement of a theme that lies very deep in the American tradition, namely the obligation ... to carry out God's will on earth. This was the motivating spirit of those who founded America'.<sup>18</sup> Bellah explains that this spirit can be communicated in two different ways: the one stressing America's God-given rights and the other stressing America's God-given responsibilities. Although God can be characterized with concrete content, the characterization is civil-religious rather than confessional-religious. According to Bellah, Christianity is a matter of influence rather than a matter of identity so that the separation of the church from the state and the state from the church can stay in place.<sup>19</sup> Bellah indicates that the presence or the absence of Jesus Christ signifies the difference between confessional and civil religion in this case. Concentrating on christology, confessional religion is specific about the *presence* of Jesus Christ in its rhetoric. Concentrating on theology, civil religion is specific about the *absence* of Jesus Christ in its rhetoric. In the United States of America, then, confessional religion is predominantly Christian and civil religion is predominantly Christianish, so to speak.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., pp. 3-4.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., pp. 8-9.

It is stunning that a sociologist such as Bellah stresses that both civil religion and confessional religion are avenues to God.<sup>20</sup> Admittedly, the sociologist speaks of a ‘reality’ that is transcendent rather than immanent, but his argument is *theological*.<sup>21</sup> Regardless of whether the reality is or is not referred to as God, Bellah contends that ‘civil religion at its best is a genuine apprehension’ of it.<sup>22</sup> The constraining ‘at its best’ clarifies that there is a camouflaged criterion to distinguish between a civil religion that is and a civil religion that is not ‘at its best’ in Bellah’s category. The category, then, is both descriptive and prescriptive.<sup>23</sup> The camouflaged criterion is uncovered where Bellah cautions against ideological identifications of God. Writing during the Cold War, he warns that religion runs rogue when Americans instrumentalize it to distinguish the free world from the unfree world because this distinction closes the country off against the other.<sup>24</sup> Due to the closure, religion is reduced to a celebration of the nation rather than a critique of the nation: it revels in its God-given rights, but rejects its God-given responsibilities. Normatively, then, it is crucial for Bellah that access to God allows for both the critique of the country and the celebration of the country. Openness to otherness is the criterion that enables Bellah to tell when civil religion is and when civil religion is not ‘at its best’. If Bellah’s criterion is turned from the implicit to the explicit, it draws a distinction between ‘uncivil’ and ‘civil’ religion. Both claims to God are communicated in a civil-religious rather than a confessional-religious register, but civil religion accomplishes identity through inclusion because it is open to a self-critique that can widen the circle of those who are represented by the claim, while uncivil religion accomplishes identity through exclusion because it is not open to a self-critique that can widen the circle of those who are represented by the claim.<sup>25</sup> Correspondingly, the cohesion of civil religion is dynamic, while the cohesion of uncivil religion is static. Cohesion is at stake in the current cross controversy. Although the

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 12. See also Richey and Jones, ‘The Civil Religion Debate’, in Richey and Jones, eds, *American Civil Religion*, p. 6.

<sup>21</sup> Bellah, ‘Civil Religion in America’, p. 12.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> For the normativity inherent in the concept, see Philip Gorski, *American Covenant: A History of Civil Religion from the Puritans to the Present* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), pp. 13-36.

<sup>24</sup> Bellah, ‘Civil Religion in America’, p. 15. See also Bellah’s critique of Richard M. Nixon’s references to religion in Robert N. Bellah, ‘American Civil Religion in the 1970s’, in Richey and Jones, eds, *American Civil Religion*, pp. 255-272.

<sup>25</sup> To be precise, my distinction between ‘civil religion’ and ‘uncivil religion’ is *analytical*. In practice, civil religion has exclusionary elements as much as uncivil religion has inclusionary elements. In the debate of the 1960s and the 1970s, theologians criticized the way inclusion comes at the cost of exclusion in American civil religion. See Charles H. Long, ‘Civil Rights – Civil Religion: Visible People and Invisible Religion’, in Richey and Jones, eds, *American Civil Religion*, pp. 211-221, who argues that ‘a great deal of the writing ... on the topic of American religion has been consciously or unconsciously ideological, serving to ... render sacred the history of European immigrants in this land’. Ibid., p. 212.

cross is a confessional-religious rather than a civil-religious symbol, Bellah's core category is analytically important and instructive for investigating the cross controversy.

In a number of statements, Söder suggested that the cross is neither Christian nor non-Christian.<sup>26</sup> The separation of the church from the state and of the state from the church in Germany's political system (albeit less austere than in the United States) was crucial for Söder's suggestions of a cultural cross.<sup>27</sup> Instead of a religion, the cross signifies a 'Kultur' for Söder, the culture that characterizes the civilization of Europe past and present.<sup>28</sup> The post-migrant context is crucial to make sense of Söder's strange choice of the cross as a symbol for the culture of Europe.<sup>29</sup> Increased immigration into Europe has kindled controversies about identity. In these controversies, politicians and pundits continue to contrast the values of (a rather imaginary) Christian culture with the values of (a rather imaginary) non-Christian culture in order to identify what is and what is not European.<sup>30</sup> Often, these contrasts come with the essentializations that create the circular logic of the clash of cultures.<sup>31</sup> Although Söder remained silent about Islam, the choice of the cross as a symbol for the historical and cultural identity of the country speaks to it. In a TV interview, he explained that the cross stands for 'tolerance', 'love of neighbour', and 'respect for human dignity'.<sup>32</sup> If one reads the statements that Söder's party published about Islam(ism) since 2015, it becomes crystal clear that the cross

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<sup>26</sup> See the summary, 'CSU beschließt: Kreuze für alle Behörden', *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 24 April 2018, available at: <http://www.sueddeutsche.de/bayern/bayern-csu-beschliesst-aufhaengen-von-kreuzen-in-behoerden-1.3956892> [last accessed 12 May 2018].

<sup>27</sup> Of course, the decree was criticized for violating this separation. However, as a former Judge from the German Federal Constitutional Court argued, if the cross is claimed as a symbol of culture, the separation remains intact. See Udo di Fabio, 'Gott steht im Grundgesetz', *Die Zeit*, 3 May 2018, available at: <https://www.zeit.de/2018/19/religioese-symbole-kreuz-markus-soeder-saekularismus-debatte/komplettansicht> [last accessed 12 May 2018].

<sup>28</sup> See again the minutes from the meeting of the cabinet, 'Bericht aus der Kabinettsitzung vom 24. April 2018'. The German concept 'Kultur' could be rendered as 'culture' or 'civilization'. For the debate about the decree, both connotations are crucial.

<sup>29</sup> Interestingly, in the two European countries that accepted most migrants during the so-called current refugee crisis, public and political controversies revolved around the symbol of the cross. For the so-called #mycross campaign in Sweden, see Johanna Gustafsson Lundberg, 'Christianity in a Post-Christian Context: Immigration, Church Identity, and the Role of Religion in Public Debates', in Schmiedel and Smith, eds, *Religion in the European Refugee Crisis*, pp. 123-143.

<sup>30</sup> In Germany, the debate revolves around the issue of whether Islam is or is not a part of the country: 'Gehört der Islam zu Deutschland?' In the last decade, politicians were asked for their opinions on this issue again and again. For studies that complicate the issue historically, empirically, and theoretically, see the contributions to Peter Antes and Rauf Ceylan, eds, *Muslimen in Deutschland: Historische Bestandsaufnahme, aktuelle Entwicklung und zukünftige Forschungsfragen* (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2017).

<sup>31</sup> Populists operate with the logic of Samuel P. Huntington's clash of civilizations. See Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996). This logic is circular because the clash between religiously rooted civilizations is both its condition and its conclusion. For a convincing critique, see Thomas Meyer, *Identitätspolitik: Vom Missbrauch kultureller Unterschiede* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2002), pp. 92-96.

<sup>32</sup> The interview with *Tagesthemen*, aired on 26 April 2018, is available at <https://www.tagesschau.de/multimedia/video/video-398341.html> [last accessed 12 May 2018].

has been chosen to pit what is considered to be Muslim (intolerance and disrespect for human dignity) against what is considered not to be Muslim (tolerance and respect for human dignity).<sup>33</sup> The decree to display the cross in the offices of the state as a confession to the country's social and legal order, then, claims that European and non-European culture—'Abendland' and 'Morgenland'—can be distinguished according to the tolerant European insiders who respect human dignity and the intolerant non-European outsiders who disrespect human dignity.<sup>34</sup> The display of the cross in the offices of the state draws the symbolic or the not so symbolic line. If Bellah's criterion is applied to the cross controversy, the decree is a case of uncivil rather than civil religion. Since the spectrum of meanings that the symbol of the cross signifies is circumscribed, it can neither accomplish the cohesion nor allow for the critique that Bellah calls for. Söder's statements about the cross suggest that it is empty—indeed, he says that Muslims should support it—but the choice of the symbol belies his suggestion. The cross is claimed under the cloak of culture in order to celebrate rather than criticize the identity of the country as Christian.

The claim to uncivil rather than civil religion displays striking similarities to the patterns of populist politics. Of course, populism is a controversial concept. As Jan-Werner Müller suggests in his studies of the principles and practices of populism, the reason for the controversies about the concept is that populism appears democratic because its protest is aimed against the elites inside and outside the parliaments.<sup>35</sup> Yet appearances are deceptive. According to Müller, populism is anti-democratic rather than democratic in as much as its claim to represent 'the people' is excluding rather than including. Considering a variety of cases from across the globe, Müller proposes that for populists 'we are the people' means '*only* we are the people'.<sup>36</sup> 'The people' emerges as *ethnos* rather than *demos*.<sup>37</sup> The populist programme, then, is one that demarcates insiders from outsiders through a claim to culture—which is precisely

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<sup>33</sup> See the publication on 'Political Islam' that Söder's party published in 2016, *Leitantrag Politischer Islam*, available at <https://www.csu.de/politik/beschluesse/leitantrag-politischer-islam/> [last accessed 12 May 2018].

<sup>34</sup> The essentialization of the contrast between 'Abendland' and 'Morgenland'—which could be rendered as 'occident' and 'orient'—is crucial to the decree. For a succinct summary of the conceptualizations of the contrast in the history of theology, see Reiner Anselm, 'Abendland oder Europa? Anmerkungen aus evangelisch-theologischer Perspektive', *Zeitschrift für Evangelische Ethik* 57:4 (2013), pp. 272-281. See again the minutes of the meeting in which the cabinet decided about the decree. Here, the cross is characterized as the symbol of *Abendland*: 'Das Kreuz ist das grundlegende Symbol der kulturellen Identität christlich-abendländischer Prägung'. 'Bericht aus der Kabinettsitzung vom 24. April 2018', para. 7.

<sup>35</sup> Jan-Werner Müller, *Was ist Populismus?* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2016), pp. 14-15.

<sup>36</sup> Jan-Werner Müller, "'The People Must Be Extracted from Within the People': Reflections on Populism', *Constellations* 21:4 (2014), pp. 483-493, at p. 490. See also, again, Müller, *Was ist Populismus?*, pp. 18-22. For a similar concept of populism that concentrates on religion, see Nadia Marzouki and Duncan McDonnell, 'Populism and Religion', in Nadia Marzouki, Duncan McDonnell, and Olivier Roy, eds, *Saving the People: How Populists Hijack Religion* (London: Hurst, 2016), pp. 1-12.

<sup>37</sup> See Ulrich Schmiedel, "'We Can Do This!' Tackling the Political Theology of Populism", in Schmiedel and Smith, eds, *Religion in the European Refugee Crisis*, pp. 205-224.



what the decree to display crosses does. In the post-migrant context, it is about the exclusion rather than the inclusion of Muslims. Populists reduce religion to a reservoir of deeply rooted cultural values: in the case of Christianity these values are considered positive, thus characterizing the insiders (tolerance and respect for human dignity); in the case of non-Christianity these values are considered negative, thus characterizing the outsiders (intolerance and disrespect for human dignity).<sup>38</sup> In the politics of populism, then, religion can be characterized as a matter of ‘belonging’ rather than ‘believing’.<sup>39</sup> Yet the Europe to which the populists belong is an ‘imagined community’ as classically conceptualized by Benedict Anderson, so that religion is—strictly speaking—a matter of ‘believing in belonging’ for populists.<sup>40</sup> It is about uncivil rather than civil religion. Ideologically, it keeps the outsider outside and the insider inside in order to cement the circular logic of the clash of cultures that so much contemporary populism communicates.<sup>41</sup>

To summarize, Bellah distinguishes between confessional religion and civil religion. Drawing on the history of the United States, he suggests that civil religion ‘at its best’ is so open to the other that it can accomplish cohesion and allow for critique. In my analysis, however, the claim to Christianity in the current cross controversy comes into view as a case of uncivil rather than civil religion. Although it claims to be about cohesion, the cohesion is accomplished uncritically through the exclusion rather than critically through the inclusion of Islam into the country’s imagined identity. The cross controversy, I have argued, displays striking similarities to the patterns of populism. For churches across Europe, the populist claim to Christianity is—with or without the symbol of the cross—a challenge.

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<sup>38</sup> See Olivier Roy, ‘Beyond Populism: The Conservative Right, the Courts and the Churches, and the Concept of a Christian Europe’, in Marzouki, McDonnell, and Roy, eds, *Saving the People*, pp. 187-188, who argues that for populists across Europe the account of Christianity has to be ‘nostalgic’ while the account of Islam has to be ‘strategic’. Ibid., pp. 197-198.

<sup>39</sup> Roy, ‘Beyond Populism’, in Marzouki, McDonnell, and Roy, eds, *Saving the People*, p. 193. In terms of content, the framework of ‘belonging’ and ‘believing’ differs from the one coined by Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing without Belonging* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994).

<sup>40</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism. New Edition* (London: Verso, 2006).

<sup>41</sup> See again Schmiedel, “‘We Can Do This!’ Tackling the Political Theology of Populism”, in Schmiedel and Smith, eds, *Religion in the European Refugee Crisis*, pp. 205-224.

## 2 Interpreting the Churches' Response to the Cross Controversy with Martin Marty

Martin Marty's 'Two Kinds of Two Kinds of Civil Religion', published in 1974, engages Bellah's conceptualization of religion critically and constructively. Bellah calls the concept of public theology that Marty coins 'a major contribution to the discussion of civil religion'.<sup>42</sup> Applying Marty's central concept to the cross controversy, I will analyze the responses to the decree by Archbishop Reinhard Marx and Bishop Heinrich Bedford-Strohm as public theology. In the post-migrant context, I will argue, public theology is promising because it provides a path out of the 'populist predicament'.

According to Marty, civil religion can be considered positively and negatively: 'liberal intellectuals in the academy', Marty quips, favour or disfavour it: if the president is a liberal (and like them), they will consider it favourably and if the president is not a liberal (and unlike them), they will consider it unfavourably—they will 'flee for cover'.<sup>43</sup> Against the normativity that is arguably apparent in Bellah's conceptualization,<sup>44</sup> Marty insists that both civil religion and confessional religion should be studied according to what they set out to do rather than according to what scholars say they should set out to do. Marty offers a typology in which 'there are two kinds of two kinds of civil religion'.<sup>45</sup> The typology that Marty offers organizes the types of civil religion according to their substance and their style. Considering that Marty is credited with coining a new concept, it is surprising that he adds: 'I shall eschew neologisms—let me disappoint those who are seeking novel designations. The stress is here on common sense'.<sup>46</sup>

Substantially, Marty distinguishes between a type of civil religion in which God and the nation diverge and a type of civil religion in which God and the nation converge.<sup>47</sup> Described differently, civil religion can communicate a God-above-the-nation on the one hand or a God-as-the-nation on the other hand (although the identification of God with the nation implies that

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<sup>42</sup> Bellah, 'American Civil Religion in the 1970s', in Richey and Jones, eds, *American Civil Religion*, p. 258.

<sup>43</sup> Marty, 'Two Kinds of Two Kinds of Civil Religion', in Richey and Jones, eds, *American Civil Religion*, p. 142.

<sup>44</sup> In response to Marty, Bellah, 'American Civil Religion in the 1970s', in Richey and Jones, eds, *American Civil Religion*, p. 257, admits that he mixed epistemological and evaluative categories in the article in *Daedalus*, but argues that 'the notion of civil religion ... is as an analytical tool for the understanding of something that exists, which, like all things human, is sometimes good and sometimes bad'.

<sup>45</sup> Marty, 'Two Kinds of Two Kinds of Civil Religion', in Richey and Jones, eds, *American Civil Religion*, p. 144.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

the meaning of “‘God” is drained’, that the word appears by default rather than design).<sup>48</sup> Marty’s distinction is instructive for the cross controversy.

Söder claimed that the cross is a cultural cross—non-religious rather than religious—but had to retract his statement in response to criticism from inside and outside the churches.<sup>49</sup> The cross, Söder conceded, is first and foremost about religion, even though it carries cultural (non-religious) and political (non-religious) connotations vital to the public square.<sup>50</sup> In accordance with Bellah’s category, his concession indicates that the state invests itself with the significance of Christianity by claiming the cross. While it would be too far-fetched to suspect a shift from a God-above-Bavaria to a God-as-Bavaria, the state’s claim to the cross stays ambiguous. Is it religious? Is it non-religious? The ambiguity implied by the identification of the historical and cultural identity of Europe with Christianity (and of the historical and cultural identity of non-Europe with non-Christianity) is exploited for political purposes by the display of crosses in the offices of the state. The significance of Christianity is—albeit civil-religiously rather than confessional-religiously—claimed for the identity of the state.

Stylistically, Marty distinguishes between a type of civil religion in which the celebration of the nation is central and a type of civil religion in which the critique of the nation is central.<sup>51</sup> ‘Within each of these two kinds’, Marty argues regarding the types of a civil-religious God-above-the-nation and a civil-religious God-as-the-nation, ‘there are two kinds of approaches or analyses. ... Let us speak of these as “priestly” and “prophetic”’.<sup>52</sup> Described differently, Marty discusses the categories of America’s God-given rights and America’s God-given responsibilities that Bellah describes in his account of the history of the United States as two styles of civil religion: ‘the one comforts the afflicted; the other afflicts the comfortable’.<sup>53</sup> Again, Marty’s distinction is instructive for the cross controversy.

The representatives of the state—with Söder leading the way—play at being priests rather than prophets. The audacity with which the crimes perpetrated in the name of the cross are ignored by the defenders of the decree is astonishing. In the Roman Empire, crosses and crucifixions communicated a ‘state terror’ that instilled fear in anyone who aimed to resist the Empire’s cultural, political and religious authority.<sup>54</sup> While the shifting interpretations of the

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> See again the TV interview with *Tagesthemen*.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Marty, ‘Two Kinds of Two Kinds of Civil Religion’, in Richey and Jones, eds, *American Civil Religion*, pp. 144-145.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 145.

<sup>54</sup> See David Tombs, ‘Crucifixion, State Terror and Sexual Abuse’, *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 53:1-2 (1999), pp. 89-109.

cross and the striking irony of the cross as a symbol of Christian culture are obviously lost on Söder, his claim to the cross as a civil-religious rather than a confessional-religious symbol shows the risk that the reference to religion in the public sphere is running. Bellah already argued with regard to the confrontations of the Cold War that the priestly celebration of a country comes at the cost of the prophetic critique of the country.<sup>55</sup> When the priests trump the prophets, the country loses religion as a reservoir for critique and self-critique.

Marty offers a detailed discussion of the four types of civil religion in the history of the United States. Interestingly, the concept of public theology that he coins in his discussion is not his core concern. He seems unaware of the impact his concept would have on the study of religion. What is public theology? According to Marty, the concept can be characterized with his typology, although the characterization hovers between the types.<sup>56</sup> Public theologians opt for a God-above-the-nation rather than a God-as-the-nation. The nation is considered to be ‘under God’.<sup>57</sup> This consideration allows public theologians—exemplified by Jonathan Edwards, Abraham Lincoln, and Reinhold Niebuhr<sup>58</sup>—to engage in priestly celebration *and* prophetic critique *concurrently*.<sup>59</sup> The combination of celebration and critique is the core characteristic of public theology for Marty. While the prophetic approach alone would be critical, but could not be received by the country and the priestly approach alone would be received by the country, but could not be critical, public theology ‘has to be dialectical’.<sup>60</sup> The dialectics of public theology provides a path out of the populist predicament. Confronted with the interpretation and instrumentalization of Christianity for a construction of the identity of Europe that pits Christianity against Islam and Islam against Christianity, the representatives of the churches are caught in a plight. Criticizing the populist claim to Christianity, they are rebuked for renouncing their Christianity for the sake of Islam. Not criticizing the populist claim to Christianity, they are rebuked for renouncing Islam for the sake of Christianity. How did Archbishop Reinhard Marx and Bishop Heinrich Bedford-Strohm respond to the populist predicament?

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<sup>55</sup> See, again, Bellah, ‘Civil Religion in America’, pp. 15-16; Bellah, ‘American Civil Religion in the 1970s’, in Richey and Jones, eds, *American Civil Religion*, pp. 255-272.

<sup>56</sup> Accordingly, Marty’s types are ideal-types. For Max Weber, ideal-types are not supposed to characterize empirical cases but are supposed *not* to characterize empirical cases. Only when the case differs from its characterization, can the ideal-type become a hermeneutic and heuristic tool. See Max Weber, ‘The “Objectivity” of Knowledge in Social Sciences and Social Policy’, in Hans Henrik Bruun and Sam Whimster, eds, *Collected Methodological Writings*, trans. Hans Henrik Bruun (London: Routledge, 2012), pp. 100-138.

<sup>57</sup> Marty, ‘Two Kinds of Two Kinds of Civil Religion’, in Richey and Jones, eds, *American Civil Religion*, p. 147.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., pp. 147-148. See also Martin E. Marty, ‘Reinhold Niebuhr: Public Theology and American Experience’, *The Journal of Religion* 54:4 (1974), pp. 332-359.

<sup>59</sup> Marty, ‘Two Kinds of Two Kinds of Civil Religion’, in Richey and Jones, eds, *American Civil Religion*, p. 148.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 149.

## 2.1 Reinhard Marx' Response

'One cannot decree a cross from above' is the title of a controversial interview with Reinhard Marx that was published one week after the decree.<sup>61</sup> Although the Archbishop admits that he is 'pleased about the sign of the cross in public spaces', he argues that the decree has caused 'division' and 'disturbance' in the public and in the private life of the country, 'down to families'.<sup>62</sup> According to Marx, the state's attempt to conquer the cross is at the core of the controversy. 'The state cannot define the sign of the cross'.<sup>63</sup> The symbol is defined neither by the state (against the church) nor by the church (against the state) but depends on the 'witness of Christians'.<sup>64</sup> Christianity is identified by 'the one who died at the cross'.<sup>65</sup> Against Söder's interpretation of the cross as a sign of culture, the Archbishop insists that the content of the central symbol of Christianity cannot be changed at will. Since 'one cannot have the cross without the man who was hung on it', the cross is always already more than culture.<sup>66</sup> 'Hanging up a cross means: I want to orient my life towards the one who died for the world at the cross'.<sup>67</sup> The cross is 'a provocation'.<sup>68</sup> Crucially, Marx calls for a conversation about the significance of Christianity for the contemporary culture of the country in which both Christians and non-Christians live.<sup>69</sup> Although the cross contributes to culture, then, the provocation of the cross is aimed at Christians rather than non-Christians. It cannot be demanded or decreed for all of the citizens.

Marx shifts from a more public (and civil-religious) to a more private (and confessional-religious) register only when he is asked: 'What does the cross mean for you?'<sup>70</sup>

It is a salutary provocation to look onto the mystery of God on the cross, onto a God who says: if you want to know something about me, look at Jesus of Nazareth. ... God gives everything—even himself—because no ... suffering leaves him unconcerned. ... Therefore, one must not banalize the cross.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> See 'Kardinal Marx zum Kreuz-Erlass: "Das Kreuz lässt sich nicht von oben verordnen"', *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 30 April 2018, available at <http://www.sueddeutsche.de/bayern/kardinal-marx-zum-kreuz-erlass-spaltung-unruhe-gegeneinander-1.3961365> [last accessed 12 May 2018],

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., para. 3-4.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., para. 4.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid. For Marx' ecclesiology, see Marx Reinhard, *Ist Kirche anders? Möglichkeiten und Grenzen einer soziologischen Betrachtungsweise* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1990).

<sup>65</sup> Marx, 'Das Kreuz lässt sich nicht von oben verordnen', para. 5.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., para. 8.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., para. 6.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., para. 11.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., para. 12.

Through a classic christological argument, Marx accentuates that God reveals Godself in Jesus Christ at the cross. The cross is the symbol of Christianity because it signals God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ. The cross thus distinguishes Christians from non-Christians. The distinction is so central for Marx that he argues that if one understood the cross as a cultural rather than a confessional symbol, 'one would not understand it at all'.<sup>72</sup> 'The cross would be expropriated by the state.'<sup>73</sup> Given that the government under Söder has called for resolute and rigorous restrictions on immigration, it is interesting how the Archbishop points to the significance of suffering here, although the pointer remains implicit rather than explicit.<sup>74</sup> Again, Marx cautions that the christological considerations are to be articulated in a framework that allows for both Christian and non-Christian approaches, given that in Munich, the capital of Bavaria, there are as many Christians as there are non-Christians.<sup>75</sup> He invokes the state for this framework: 'The state is not supposed to explain what the cross signifies'.<sup>76</sup> On the contrary, according to the Archbishop, the state is supposed to guarantee that religious and non-religious beliefs can be articulated in the public sphere, without stipulating the content of these beliefs.<sup>77</sup> Countering the claim of the state to the cross, Marx concludes that the cross is neither a symbol for a country nor a symbol for a culture. 'God created all human beings. It [the cross] is a symbol ... of salvation, the salvation of the world'.<sup>78</sup> Since it stands for salvation rather than the state, the cross cannot be put into a political programme. It offers orientation to those who work in politics, but its orientation is indirect rather than direct.

## 2.2 *Heinrich Bedford-Strohm's Response*

Heinrich Bedford-Strohm agrees with Marx. In 'Debates about Identity in the Church: Making the Meaning of the Cross Public', he reflects on the public and political orientation offered by the cross.<sup>79</sup> The article runs to about 3000 words—a mammoth for any newspaper. It was published three weeks after the decree, but took up statements that the Bishop had made in

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., para. 14.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> For Marx' social and political ethics, see Reinhard Marx, *Das Kapital: Ein Plädoyer für den Menschen* (München: Pattloch, 2008).

<sup>75</sup> Marx, 'Das Kreuz lässt sich nicht von oben verordnen', para. 22.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., para. 16.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., para. 18.

<sup>79</sup> See Heinrich Bedford-Strohm, 'Identitätsdebatte in der Kirche: Den Sinn des Kreuzes öffentlich machen', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 10 May 2018, available at: [http://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/inland/bedford-strohm-ueber-die-identitaetsdebatte-der-kirche-15577212.html?printPagedArticle=true#pageIndex\\_0](http://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/inland/bedford-strohm-ueber-die-identitaetsdebatte-der-kirche-15577212.html?printPagedArticle=true#pageIndex_0) [last accessed 12 May 2018].

online and offline media before.<sup>80</sup> Martin Luther's *Heidelberg Disputation* is taken as a point of departure.<sup>81</sup> Since it claims that God is to be seen through the cross rather than creation, Bedford Strohm suggests, the Reformation opens up a new approach to theology. He cites Luther: 'The theologian who looks for God's unconcerned glory calls the bad good and the good bad'.<sup>82</sup> The theology of the cross developed by Luther is crucial for the doctrine of justification. According to Luther, faith is not about justification because of good deeds, but about good deeds because of justification.<sup>83</sup> Bedford-Strohm concludes: 'The core of Luther's spiritual revolution was the faith in the crucified God'.<sup>84</sup> God's love is based on God's deed for humanity rather than humanity's deed for God. It is about God's grace. In the history of theology, Luther's theology of the cross was a catalyst for the controversies between Protestantism and Catholicism. Although none of these controversies are addressed in his article, Bedford-Strohm stresses confessional-religious rather than civil-religious resources more than Marx. Given the make-up of Bavaria, where Protestantism is in the minority and Catholicism is in the majority, it makes sense that Bedford-Strohm is hesitant to claim Luther's theology of the cross for state and society.

However, Bedford-Strohm also argues that the significance of the cross for the public square needs to be clarified.<sup>85</sup> He rejects arguments that pit the religious against the public or the public against the religious, insisting that the one is the condition for the other. Only if the cross is taken as a symbol of Christianity can it have significance for the public square.<sup>86</sup> Bedford-Strohm maintains: 'The cross stands for a God who shows himself in the crucified'.<sup>87</sup> He accentuates the christological significance of the symbol of the cross to anchor a theology that opts for the disadvantaged rather than the advantaged.<sup>88</sup> In the context of the government's increasing restrictions on immigration, it is interesting how he concludes that 'one only understands the cross..., when it prompts critical self-reflection'.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> See the post about the decree from 29 April 2018 on Bedford-Strohm's profile on Facebook, available at: <https://www.facebook.com/landesbischof/> [last accessed 12 May 2018].

<sup>81</sup> For an English translation, see Martin Luther, 'Heidelberg Disputation', in Harold J. Grimm, Helmut T. Lehmann (eds.), *Luther's Works*, vol. 31 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1957), pp. 39-58.

<sup>82</sup> Bedford-Strohm, 'Identitätsdebatte in der Kirche', para. 7.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., para. 11.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., para. 12.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., para. 14-15.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., para. 15.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., para. 15-16. For Bedford-Strohm's concept of justice, including the impact that liberation theology had on it, see Heinrich Bedford-Strohm, *Vorrang für die Armen: Auf dem Weg zu einer theologischen Theorie der Gerechtigkeit* (Gütersloh: Kaiser, 1993).

<sup>89</sup> Bedford-Strohm, 'Identitätsdebatte in der Kirche', para. 16.

Bedford-Strohm explains and evaluates a variety of positions on the role of the cross in the public square. Of course, there is the option of secularism—Bedford-Strohm refers to ‘laïcité’—that confines the cross to the private rather than the public realm.<sup>90</sup> But Bedford-Strohm insists that it is unclear why non-religious worldviews can and religious worldviews cannot be communicated in public. The option of secularism offers no reasons for its restrictions. Accordingly, there is a place for the cross in the public square. The question is which and where. The cross can be used to characterize the historical imprint or the cultural identity of a society.<sup>91</sup> But such characterizations, Bedford-Strohm cautions, work through either the explicit or the implicit exclusion of those who consider themselves not to be represented by the cross. Given that societies today are marked by the pluralization of religious and non-religious worldviews, both civil religion and not so civil religion are outdated.<sup>92</sup> Cohesion cannot be accomplished through the cross because in such cases either the cross excludes (when it is overtly Christian) or the cross is empty (when it is only Christian-ish).<sup>93</sup> Bedford-Strohm rejects civil religion which, according to him, always already includes civil-religious and uncivil-religious interpretations.<sup>94</sup> Implying that the government has moved towards populist politics, he points to populist invocations of the cross as abuses rather than uses of Christianity.<sup>95</sup>

The significance of the cross that he confirms is called ‘öffentlich orientierend’, offering orientation in the public square.<sup>96</sup> This is the one and only option for Bedford-Strohm. He argues that democracy requires the resource of religions in the public square. Given the historical and cultural character of Germany, the church and the cross are crucial to preserve this resource, ‘perhaps’, the Bishop adds, ‘particularly in Bavaria’.<sup>97</sup> In accordance with the Archbishop, Bedford-Strohm maintains that the state cannot decide what the cross should or should not signify. Christianity speaks for the cross as much as the cross speaks for Christianity. Pointing to the *Heidelberg Disputation*, Bedford-Strohm insists, ‘the cross cannot be reduced

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., para. 20.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., para. 18-19.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., para. 19.

<sup>93</sup> For Bedford-Strohm’s concept of cohesion, see Heinrich Bedford-Strohm, *Gemeinschaft aus kommunikativer Freiheit: Sozialer Zusammenhalt in der modernen Gesellschaft. Ein theologischer Beitrag* (Gütersloh: Kaiser, 1999).

<sup>94</sup> Bedford-Strohm, ‘Identitätsdebatte in der Kirche’, para. 18

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., para. 20.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.



to a sign for the successful provision of a home (*Heimat*).<sup>98</sup> Instead, it is ‘at least as much the sign of a thought-provoking challenge of all the values of the world’.<sup>99</sup>

Both Archbishop and Bishop point to the provocative potential of the symbol of the cross. Yet since the provocation is voiced under pluralized and pluralizing conditions, it requires a conversation to which both Christians and non-Christians ought to be allowed to contribute. The diversity of faiths has to find its place in the public square.<sup>100</sup> Of course, Christianity offers a voice in this conversation. ‘When the cross is displayed in state offices,’ Bedford-Strohm concludes his considerations, ‘it should recall the mystery of salvation through Jesus Christ’, a humanity that is dignified by the fact that ‘Christ died for all humanity’, and ‘cultural humbleness’ rather than cultural haughtiness.<sup>101</sup> Applying his criterion that the cross should cause ‘critical self-reflection’, he asks: ‘Why do we have so little success in communicating the Christian faith into society?’<sup>102</sup> The question leads him into a discussion of the organizational and institutional challenges that the church has to confront.<sup>103</sup> For Bedford-Strohm, then, the decree to display the cross is also an occasion for critique of the church: if the cross is misunderstood, the misunderstanding shows the failures of the church.

### 2.3 *Public Theology in the Populist Predicament*

The responses to the cross controversy by the representatives of the two mainline churches in Germany are cases of public theology à la Marty.<sup>104</sup> In a dialectics of the priestly celebration and the prophetic critique of the country, they point to the cross as a symbol that offers orientation for political practice because it understands the nation to be under God. What emerges in these responses to the cross controversy is the promise and the potential that public theology has for churches in the populist predicament. Public theologians like the Archbishop and the Bishop argue that the nation is under God. The concept of God, then, is the criterion that allows for what Marty calls the dialectics of the priestly and the prophetic. In the populist predicament, this dialectics is crucial: with the prophetic critique, the public theologian can

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., para. 21.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> For Bedford-Strohm’s position on the significance of faith(s) in the public square, see Heinrich Bedford-Strohm, ‘Public Theology and Political Ethics’, *International Journal of Public Theology* 6:3 (2012), pp. 273-291.

<sup>101</sup> Bedford-Strohm, ‘Identitätsdebatte in der Kirche’, para. 21.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., para. 22.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., para. 23-36.

<sup>104</sup> Of course, Bedford-Strohm is considered a central representative of public theology in Germany. See Heinrich Bedford-Strohm, *Position beziehen: Perspektiven einer öffentlichen Theologie* (München: Claudius, 2012). However, the programme of ‘öffentliche Theologie’ in Germany marks one position within the field of public theology rather than the field of public theology. Its programme is not necessarily congruent with Marty’s programme. See Florian Höhne and Frederike van Oorschot, eds, *Grundtexte Öffentliche Theologie* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2015) for a comparison of the concepts of public theology on a variety of continents.

tackle the rebuff that the church prioritizes Christianity at the cost of Islam; with the priestly celebration, the public theologian can tackle the rebuff that the church prioritizes Islam at the cost of Christianity; and with the dialectics of both, public theology provides a path out of the populist predicament.

In the case of the cross controversy, the representatives of the churches translated the dialectics of the prophetic and the priestly into a two-track argumentation. Neither Archbishop nor Bishop opposed the decree altogether.<sup>105</sup> Against the interpretation of the cross by the state, they pointed to the cross as confessional rather than cultural. Against the instrumentalization of the cross by the state, they pointed to contemporary culture as both Christian and non-Christian. Christianity, then, cannot be at the centre of the state's identity construction. But in the conversation of Christians and non-Christians, Christianity can make a crucial contribution—with or without the sign of the cross.

To summarize, Marty distinguished the references to religion in the public square according to substance and style in order to develop a typology of civil religions. His aim was to return the discussion about Bellah's category from the prescriptive to the descriptive. Bellah welcomed Marty's critique and contribution, particularly the concept of public theology that Marty proposed in passing. Public theology understands the nation to be under God which underscores the dialectics of prophetic critique and priestly celebration. In the context of what I have called the populist predicament, public theology is crucial because it celebrates and criticizes Christianity concurrently. For churches across Europe, then, public theology can answer the complex and critical challenge of the populist claim to Christianity.

### **3 Intervening in the Cross Controversy: The Pluralization of Public Theology**

Public theology is a promising and pertinent way to respond to the populist predicament. Building on Bellah, I have analyzed and assessed populism as a phenomenon that runs on 'uncivil religion' rather than 'civil religion'. For populists, religion is crucial for the contrast between insiders and outsiders that is construed through a claim to the strong and stable identity of a country. In the case of the cross controversy, identity is shaped and sharpened through the

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<sup>105</sup> Although overlapping, the populist predicament is not identical to the predicaments that churches face in confrontation with racism. See Andrew P. Davey, 'Confronting a Beast: The Church of England and the British National Party', *International Journal of Public Theology* 5:4 (2011), pp. 435-457.

exclusion rather than the inclusion of the other, identified with Islam. The consequence is a static rather than a dynamic cohesion of the country. If churches respond to the interpretation and instrumentalization of Christianity for populist politics, they are confronted with the challenge that I have called the ‘populist predicament’: too much critique of Christianity will lead to an assessment of them favouring Islam at the cost of Christianity and too much celebration of Christianity will lead to an assessment of them favouring Christianity at the cost of Islam. I have argued the programme of public theology that Marty proposed in passing provides a promising response to the populist predicament, because it is by definition dialectical: when rebuked for too much celebration, public theologians can point to their critique and when rebuked for too much critique, public theologians can point to celebration. In the case of the cross controversy, the interventions by Reinhard Marx and Heinrich Bedford-Strohm indicate the significance of public theology to confront populist politics in the post-migrant context. Of course, both the Archbishop and the Bishop were charged with criticisms that they strengthen Christianity at the cost of Islam or that they strengthen Islam at the cost of Christianity. Yet, in a way, these criticisms only confirm how challenging and complex the populist predicament is for churches in the post-migrant context.

In a theological critique of the churches, Friedrich Wilhelm Graf proposes that the decree to display crosses in the offices of the state causes a banalization of the central symbol of Christianity.<sup>106</sup> The representatives of the churches, he persists, have not opposed this banalization firmly and forcefully enough.<sup>107</sup> Dogmatically, Graf criticizes the way the representatives talk about the cross as a symbol for theology. While it sounds sensible to theologians to suggest that seeing the cross should evoke a sense of mystery, it is unclear where the sense of mystery would come from when one sees a cross while one joins the queues in the overcrowded waiting area of a state office in order to fill in paper work.<sup>108</sup> Hence, while the interventions might be meaningful for theologians, the meaning is lost in the concrete case. Ethically, Graf criticizes the way the representatives talk about the cross as a symbol for anthropology. Again, while it sounds sensible to theologians to suggest that seeing the cross should call politicians to act in a way that respects the dignity of all human beings, it is no guarantee for such actions. ‘Will the Bishop pray for the crosses to fall down’, Graf asks, when

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<sup>106</sup> Friedrich Wilhelm Graf, ‘CSU treibt Schindluder mit einem Glaubenssymbol’, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 26 April 2018, available at <http://www.sueddeutsche.de/bayern/aussenansicht-auf-kreuzzug-1.3958057> [last accessed 12 May 2018] and Friedrich Wilhelm Graf, ‘Haltung unklar: Der bayerische Kreuzerlass und die Haltung der Kirchen’, *Zeitzeichen: Evangelische Kommentare zu Religion und Gesellschaft*, available at <https://zeitzeichen.net/geschichte-politik-gesellschaft/bayerischer-kreuzesstreit/> [last accessed 12 May 2018].

<sup>107</sup> Graf, ‘Haltung unklar’, para. 1. Throughout, Graf concentrates more on Protestantism than on Catholicism.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., para. 2.

these politicians ratify further restrictions on immigration with inhumane consequences?<sup>109</sup> Hence, again, while the interventions might be meaningful for theologians, the meaning is lost in the concrete case. Graf's insistence on the day-to-day consequences of the display of the cross is both challenging and convincing. In contrast to the representatives of the churches who accepted the decree but amended the definition of the cross, he calls for a firm and forceful critique. The churches ought to oppose the decree to display crosses in all offices of the state of Bavaria at all cost. Is public theology, as Graf seems to suggest, a dead-end? Is it theoretically feasible but practically unfeasible? Is it a theological pipe dream?

By way of conclusion, I will respond to the practical problem by returning to the conversation between Robert Bellah and Martin Marty. Already in the 1960s and 1970s, both of them argued that public theology could be central for the future of civil and not so civil religion in the public square. Bellah calls for a 'world civil religion'.<sup>110</sup> His core concern is 'that we open our search ... beyond the ambit of our own tradition' so as to connect different and diverse traditions in a 'movement toward human liberation'.<sup>111</sup> If religions are civil rather than uncivil—which is to say, open to the other—such liberation should be a possible and a practical project.<sup>112</sup> Marty is a little more cautious and a little more careful. In response to Bellah, he suggests that the future can draw neither only on universalized (civil) religion nor only on particularized (confessional) religion.<sup>113</sup> Given that universalization does not take the distinct theological content of individual traditions seriously while particularization does not take the diverse sociological contexts of individual traditions seriously, the 'future belongs, no doubt, to neither but only both'.<sup>114</sup> But in spite of their different programmes and their distinct prognoses, both scholars see the promise of public theology for the future. As Bellah argues,

A variety of interpretations, even a cumulative tradition of interpretation, is not inconsistent with the openness of civil religious transcendence as long as no public theological position is institutionalized as a civil religious orthodoxy. Indeed, a variety of public theologies is a guarantee of the openness of civil religion.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid., para. 1. Graf cites Herbert Prantl, 'Söder liest eine politische Messe', *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 30 April 2014, available at: <http://www.sueddeutsche.de/bayern/kreuze-bayern-behoerden-soeder-kommentar-1.3961326> [last accessed 12 May 2018].

<sup>110</sup> Bellah, 'Civil Religion in America', p. 110.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., p. 266.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., pp. 266-270.

<sup>113</sup> Marty, 'Two Kinds of Two Kinds of Civil Religion', in Richey and Jones, eds, *American Civil Religion*, pp. 155-156.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., p. 156.

<sup>115</sup> Bellah, 'American Civil Religion in the 1970s', in Richey and Jones, eds, *American Civil Religion*, 259. Bellah responds to the theological critique of his category by Herbert Richardson, 'Civil Religion in Theological Perspective', in Richey and Jones, eds, *American Civil Religion*, pp. 161-184.

Accordingly, public theologies—in the *plural* rather than the *singular*—are crucial to keep religion in the public square open to the other. Openness to otherness, then, is the criterion that demands and defines a pluralist position of public theology.

In the case of the cross controversy, both the Archbishop and the Bishop have called for a conversation of non-Christians and Christians about the significance of religion for contemporary culture. However, the call for a conversation is not a conversation. Although the church leaders accept that contemporary culture is pluralized and pluralizing, they never question whether the sign of the cross in the offices of the state might communicate a claim to the cultural hegemony and the cultural homogeneity of Christianity.<sup>116</sup> But if the core concern of public theologians is to keep the culture of the country open, the cross cannot be the *only* symbol. If they would take their call for a conversation of Christians and non-Christians seriously, the Christian representatives would have to call for the display of non-Christian symbols (as much as the non-Christian representatives would have to call for the display of Christian symbols). Public theology would have to be pluralized.

Crucially, the pluralist position of public theology might suffice to respond to Graf's critique of the representatives of the churches in terms of dogmatics and ethics. Imagine the cross was displayed together with the symbols of all Abrahamic religions. Dogmatically, the three symbols might still not evoke a sense of mystery while one queues in overcrowded waiting areas. However, in combination, they might provoke considerations or conversations about the significance of these symbols for the mystery of God. Ethically, the three symbols might still not guarantee that the government will adhere to the humanitarian impulses of the three Abrahamic religions. However, in combination, they might provoke considerations or conversations about the significance of these symbols for the rules that persons from different backgrounds live by, for their convergences, their divergences, and their contribution to personal and communal ways of life. The conversations between Christians and non-Christians that the Bishop and the Archbishop call for, then, could be the consequence of the pluralization of public theology.

The pluralist position—Christian representatives opting for non-Christian symbols and non-Christian representatives opting for Christian symbols—would be central to the practice of public theology. Theologically, the considerations and conversations could communicate that civil religion is like confessional religion 'at its best a genuine apprehension of God'.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> For a convincing critique of the tacit and not so tacit claims to cultural hegemony and cultural homogeneity in Christian public and political theology, see Jayne Svenungsson, 'Public Faith and the Common Good: A Radical Messianic Proposal', *Political Theology* 14:6 (2013), pp. 744-757.

<sup>117</sup> Bellah, 'Civil Religion in America', p. 12.

Sociologically, the considerations and conversations could turn the offices of the state where symbols are shown in combination into laboratories for the post-migrant context. Such conflictual negotiation and continuous re-negotiation of identity is a condition for a construction of identity that includes rather than excludes the other. If post-migrant societies are about conversation, public theology needs to support these conversations, however conflictual and however controversial they might be. In these conversations, openness to otherness does not mean that public theologians cannot argue for the significance of ‘their’ symbols. But it does mean that they cannot stop there.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> I am grateful for the comments and criticisms that I received from Lukas Meyer, Hannah Strømmen and the two anonymous peer-reviewers.